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ABSTRACT

The "Goals 2000: Educate America Act" emphasizes including all students in education reform considerations and expects all students to achieve world-class educational standards and learn challenging content to a high level of performance. The Act also establishes voluntary opportunity-to-learn (OTL) standards. OTL standards are defined as the criteria for, and the basis of, assessing the sufficiency or quality of the resources, practices, and conditions necessary to provide all students with the opportunity to learn material in national or state content standards. Different perspectives view OTL standards as equivalent to school delivery standards, as part of systemic reform, as input conditions, and as a time variable. Issues surrounding OTL standards include: (1) how to define OTL standards, (2) how to measure OTL standards, (3) minimum standards and "dumbing down," (4) when OTL standards can be applied, (5) incorporating standards into existing procedures, and (6) potential for confusing policies and increasing legal issues. Students with disabilities are often excluded from discussions of OTL standards, and in including them, the qualitative nature of education must be considered in addition to the quantitative nature of instruction. Five recommendations are offered. (JDD)

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# Opportunity-to-Learn Standards

National Center on Educational Outcomes
The College of Education
University of Minnesota

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# Opportunity-to-Learn Standards

## Background

There are two prevalent concerns in education today: Standards of excellence and greater accountability for results. This focus is leading to further concerns about the fairness of holding students responsible for reaching high academic standards when they have not been provided with the opportunity to learn.

Most Americans want all students, including students with disabilities, not only to have the opportunity to learn the skills and knowledge set in content standards, but also to achieve the level of competence set in performance standards.

President Clinton signed education reform legislation on March 31, 1994, making opportunity-to-learn standards (OTL standards) voluntary. This legislation, known as *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (PL 103-227), emphasizes including all students in education reform considerations. All students, including students with disabilities, are expected to achieve world-class educational standards and learn challenging content to a high level of performance.

The rationale behind setting OTL standards is clearly stated in *Goals 2000*: Schools and school systems must be held responsible and accountable for student outcomes. However, setting OTL standards depends on defining what OTL standards really are, deciding how to measure them, and resolving several issues that surround the concept.

This report addresses these issues and makes recommendations for how to reasonably include students with disabilities when considering OTL standards.

## Definition

In *Goals 2000*, OTL standards are defined as "the criteria for, and the basis of assessing the sufficiency or quality of the resources, practices, and conditions necessary at each level of the education system to provide all students with the opportunity to learn the material in voluntary national content standards or state content standards" (§3(a)(7)). Furthermore, the voluntary national opportunity-to-learn standards (§213(c)(2)) address the following:

- **Curricula, instructional materials, and technologies**
- **Teacher capability**
- **Continuous professional development**
- **curriculum alignment, instructional practices, and assessments of content standards**
- **Safety and security of the learning environment**
- **Non-discriminatory policies, and instructional practices**

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- **Other factors that help students receive a fair opportunity to achieve the knowledge and skills in the content standards.**

Many different perspectives reflect what OTL can or should be in this basic definition. Among the major ones are the following:

***1. OTL Standards as Equivalent to School Delivery Standards***

OTL standards may be replacing school delivery standards. Both protect students from being unfairly held responsible for failing to reach the content and performance standards when they have not had appropriate, fair opportunity to learn. According to the National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST), school delivery standards set out criteria for a school's capacity and performance in providing quality education for students.

Additionally, both OTL and school delivery standards carefully consider the extent to which a school delivers the opportunity to learn to students and takes the responsibility for student outcomes. For OTL standards to be equivalent to school delivery standards, however, they also need to address safe school environments, school organizational characteristics, and quality of school life factors, all of which are typically included in school delivery standards.

***2. OTL Standards as Part of Systemic Reform***

OTL standards are not limited to a few criteria that provide quality instruction and curriculum. They also address professional development issues and whether policies align with curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Although OTL standards may not be considered at the same level as systemic reform, systemic school reform still has a potential impact on providing a fair educational opportunity.

***3. OTL Standards as Input Conditions***

When schools allocate resources to instruction and fund programs, students often are considered to have the opportunity to learn. Input conditions that generally provide opportunity to learn include: availability of teachers, instructional materials, and curriculum. Content and instructional quality are regarded as the essence of the OTL standards and the best predictors of student achievement.

Although funding alone is not a sufficient variable for improving schools, schools still are being held accountable based only on the use of the funds provided. Without adequate funding, schools may not be able to provide quality instruction on the content covered in content standards.

What else is needed? To begin with, more effective use of resources. When schools utilize approaches that emphasize professional development and teacher training, they take a step toward influencing how resources are used.

***4. OTL Standards as a Time Variable***

Educators concerned with the teaching-learning process in classroom settings find themselves dealing with the recurring variable of time. In fact, it has become a key part of the opportunity a student has to learn.

Take the positive relationship between time allocated to instruction or time spent in school and student achievement. Differences in achievement consistently relate to: the differences in the amount of time schools provide in relation to the time needed to reach a certain level of mastery. But, simply extending the school year or the length of the school day without considering the different amounts of time individuals need to reach an objective or complete a task may produce inconsistent consequences in school achievement.

Concerns about the time needed for learning mirror the argument that there needs to be fair and sufficient opportunity to learn. Schools will have to decide whether to provide extra time for students who need more time to master a given learning task.

## Issues

Following are several major issues surrounding OTL standards. Many of them, either directly or indirectly, relate to implementing and incorporating standards within current state policies and practices.

▶ ***How to Define OTL Standards***

Educators and individuals concerned with education define OTL standards differently, depending on their viewpoint about the specifics of or the use of standards. The question at issue has become: What constitutes appropriate, fair opportunity?

When OTL and OTL standards are defined differently in different settings, indices of OTL in different schools, districts, or states cannot be compared. For instance, OTL could be academic engaged time in one school, money spent on provision of instruction in another, availability of trained teachers in a third, and curriculum coverage in a fourth. These variations in definition result in comparisons that have no meaning. At issue is the need to gain consensus on the question: What is the opportunity to learn?

▶ ***How to Measure OTL Standards***

Are OTL standards too hard to measure? In order to know whether students have had opportunities to learn, educators need to know: **What to measure, how to measure, and when to measure.**

Self-report devices, using teacher interviews or daily logs, can measure how well OTL standards are being met. However, self-report devices

## Setting or Defining OTL Standards

**The following indicators can be used in setting or defining OTL standards:**

- **Lengthening the amount of time that students spend in school**
  Either lengthening the school day or the school year as a way to increase opportunity to learn.

- **Measuring the amount of time allocated to instruction**
  This would be done as an index of OTL, since a considerable amount of time that students are in school may be spent in non-instructional activities. Minutes or hours of academic content that students are taking or credit hours being delivered are another way to measure allocated time.

- **Using academic engaged time, active learning time, or active responding time**
  It has been proposed to use these as an index of OTL. The methodology used to measure academic engaged time involves observing students in classrooms and calculating the amount of time they are actively engaged. This becomes important because even during the time allocated to instruction students still may not be actively engaged in learning or responding to instruction.

- **Counting the amount of money spent on providing instruction**
  This could be the overall school budget, per-pupil expenditure, teacher salaries, or other similar measures. Is there a direct correlation between money spent, quantity and quality of instructional resources, and pupil outcomes? Since it's expensive to provide special education services to students with disabilities, using some index of funding as a sole measure of OTL makes it appear that students with disabilities receive more opportunities to learn than others. It may be necessary to balance a funding measure with some kind of weighting for resources needed.

- **Gathering information from teacher interviews or daily logs**
  This information will measure how well the curriculum is covered. For example, content coverage is indicated by topics covered in each class period and by the amount of emphasis placed on each topic. This information also will indicate the modes of instruction, the types of student activities, and the types of instructional materials that are used.

and self-review procedures are not appropriate for accountability purposes.

A school accreditation process may be used to determine the levels at which the OTL standards are being met, and then to make recommendations for improvement. The process of measuring how well each school meets the standards runs the risk of transforming the standards into checklists of minimum amounts or types of resources and practices. Either in self-review or in accreditation processes, OTL standards cannot be measured simply by referring to a checklist of resources, inputs, or curriculum content areas.

- ***Minimum Standards and "Dumbing Down"***
  OTL standards define the conditions of teaching and learning challenging content at a high level. Expectations for higher-order skills and knowledge for all students might produce failure in those schools where a number of disadvantaged students have not had appropriate opportunities to learn.

  Under the school reform movement, all students are expected to learn challenging content and complex problem skills. Dumbing down the material for the disadvantaged through basic-skills curriculum and compensatory education represents a denial of opportunity to learn.

- ***When OTL Standards Could be Applied***
  When to apply OTL standards varies, since they involve many different components of the educational system. OTL standards could be applied only when outcomes information signals a problem, rather than measuring OTL in all schools regardless of outcomes. This means, if educational outcomes meet desired levels, there is no need to worry about ensuring equity of educational opportunity.

  Another recommendation measures both OTL and outcomes at the same time. OTL must then be examined for subgroups of students for which OTL is not what it should be, even when the overall outcomes are acceptable.

- ***How Can OTL Standards be Incorporated into Existing Procedures?***
  Current state policies that accredit schools and review them for quality hold opportunities for OTL standards to be incorporated. Including the opportunity-to-learn notion within federal education reform law, no matter how weak it may seem, needs to be the first step toward greater incorporation of OTL standards into state policies and school review practices.

- ***OTL Will Result in Chaos***
  It is likely that each school system will define, measure, and implement OTL standards differently. It also is likely that the general lack of clarity about what OTL is will, in turn, lead to confusing policies and an increasing number of legal issues.

  Indeed, there could even be a dramatic increase in the number of lawsuits against schools for failing to provide students with appropriate, fair opportunity to learn. In general, the potential is great for mass confusion and chaos.

### Incorporating OTL Standards

An accountability system in California has components that review schools to monitor their progress toward providing all students with an equal opportunity to learn.

To some extent, California has already incorporated OTL standards within its existing mechanisms. But, should it be incorporating these standards to a much greater extent?

If school systems are to become more accountable for student outcomes, the answer is yes.

## Implications

In *Raising Standards for American Education*, NCEST noted that "if not accompanied by measures to

ensure equal opportunities to learn, national content and performance standards could help widen the achievement gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged in our society" (p. E-12).

Basic equity in education continues to be discussed because equity does not mean the use of the same educational approach for all students. For instance, students with disabilities have been treated differently when discussing OTL standards.

- ***Students with Disabilities Fail to be Mentioned***
  American educators have tended to exclude students with disabilities from discussions of assessment and accountability-related issues. A similar situation exists for discussions on the topic of OTL.

  OTL standards address concerns about whether the consequences of inadequacies and inequities in learning and teaching are unfairly attributed to students rather than to school systems. Many proponents of OTL standards mention poor or minority students who would be at a disadvantage when more demanding content and higher levels of expectation are imposed. But there is no mention of students with disabilities.

  Emphasis on challenging content and higher levels of performance also is a burden to students with disabilities. If students with disabilities fail to be included when implementing OTL standards, then there is the risk that they will be viewed as second-class citizens for whom educators are not responsible.

- ***More Attention Given to Students with Disabilities***
  Should education provide students with disabilities with the same amount of opportunity to learn as everybody else? Or, should education provide the amount of opportunity necessary for them to be successful? These questions make the distinction between absolute measures of opportunity to learn and measures that are weighted by the need the student exhibits.

  Some educators suggest that students with disabilities should get more opportunities to learn than students without disabilities. Rather than reducing expectations for their achievement, schools should provide them with a quality education as one of the ways to help them attain high expectations.

As discussions continue on how to keep opportunity-to-learn standards rigorous for students with disabilities, the qualitative nature of education must be considered in addition to the quantitative nature of instruction.

## Recommendations

- Define OTL as a combination of concepts. Although the final version of *Goals 2000* gives OTL limited coverage, its first recommendation indicates that OTL is to be viewed as something more than curriculum coverage or financial resources in a school.
- Involve all communities in the discussion of OTL standards. But, it is of particular concern for educators to involve individuals with disabilities or individuals familiar with disability issues (which is currently required by the law).
- Keep OTL standards flexible by retaining a flexible view of what they are for students with different needs.
- Monitor the effects of OTL standards and *Goals 2000* reform on students with disabilities. Some suggestions are to develop self-report devices, interview teachers, or use daily logs.
- Keep OTL standards rigorious for students with disabilities by looking at the qualitative nature of their education in addition to the quantitative nature of the educational instruction they receive.

## Resources

***Appraising Educational Innovations: Implications for Opportunity to Learn Standards***. National Center to Improve the Tools of Educators (1993). Eugene, OR: University of Oregon.

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## About NCEO

The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), established in 1990, works with state departments of education, national policy-making groups, and others to facilitate and enrich the development and use of indicators of educational outcomes for students with disabilities. It is believed that responsible use of such indicators will enable students with disabilities to achieve better results from their educational experiences.

The Center represents a collaborative effort of the University of Minnesota, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, and St. Cloud State University.

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## NCEO Staff

Robert H. Bruininks
Judith L. Elliott
Ronald N. Erickson
Patricia J. Grafstrom
Kevin S. McGrew
Dorene L. Scott
James G. Shriner
Patricia S. Seppanen
Martha L. Thurlow, assistant director
James E. Ysseldyke, director

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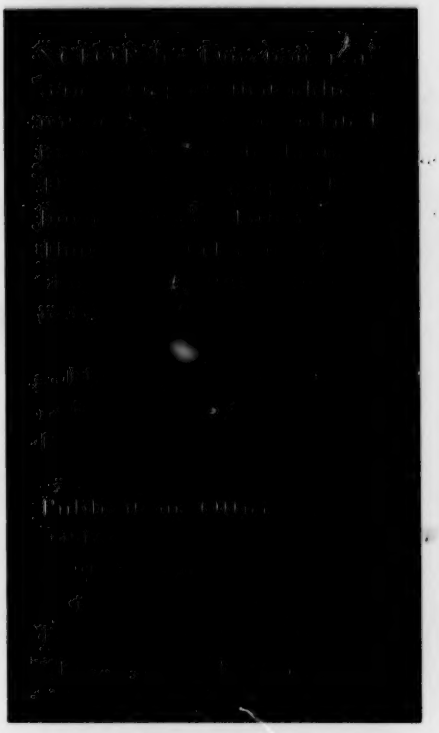



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